

Effective Advisers to Congress

The Science Policy Division of Library of Congress, although jury-rigged, gives high-quality output.

by Frank Sartwell

In a series of jerry-built partitions set incongruously into an ornate marble exhibition hall in the Library of Congress, an understaffed, overworked group of 23 people labor to tell Congress what it must know about the new realms of science.

Their output—although it may not, in a given instance, be as good as they would like to make it—is widely respected on Capitol Hill, and their influence is heavy. Even veteran Hill staffers, some of whom sneered at the idea when it was put through two and a half years ago, now respect the Science Policy Division of the Legislative Reference Service.

“From where I sit,” one said last week, “they do an excellent job.”

The division, within the limits of its manpower (it has never been fully staffed) stands ready to help any Congressman, or Congressional committee in any scientific matter—from answering a child’s question to planning a major set of hearings, suggesting witnesses and writing the questions committee members might want to ask.

In a government which will spend some \$16.2 billion dollars on research and development this year, while wrestling with a host of problems such as pollution of air, water and soil, the division probably has more effect on science policy than any other single group.

Although the President’s Office of Science and Technology is larger and better known, the Science Policy Division has greater influence where the money comes from. It was set up originally as a balance to the OST, to give Congress an impartial source of information. Previously, many Congressmen felt, too much of the data that went into a decision was supplied by people who had a vested interest in the result.

The division has been surprisingly successful; like its offices, its command structure has been rather jury-rigged. Currently, the division operates under its second acting chief. The shortage of men who are simultaneously scientists, administrators, able writers of English, and dedicated enough to work nights and weekends for months at a time is such that they get shuffled about from agency to agency with confusing speed.

So the head of the legislature’s science advisers is currently on leave to

work in the executive branch, the acting head of the division was plucked from the executive, and they confer by phone just about every day.

To sort out the cast of characters, start with Edward Wenk Jr. Before there was a Science Policy Division, Dr. Wenk was a senior specialist in space and science on the staff of the Legislative Reference Service. He headed, staffed, and virtually created the division when it was set up. Between stints he worked for OST.

Two of the men who originally passed on Dr. Wenk’s hiring at the library later acted in his stead. The first was Theodore M. Schad, now promoted to assistant director of the whole LRS; the second, currently acting chief, Dr. Charles S. Sheldon II, was recruited by Dr. Wenk from the executive department just before Wenk himself moved over for a second tour on “the other side of town” as Executive Secretary of the President’s National Council on Marine Resources and Engineering Development.

Dr. Sheldon, a lanky, talkative specialist on space and transportation, helped draft the law setting up the Communications Satellite Corp. as a semi-private, semi-public agency. He also helped write the basic Space Act.

Dr. Sheldon’s knowledge of the workings of the United States Government is comprehensive. He has served as technical director of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics and on the National Aeronautics and Space Council. Before that he put in some years with the LRS and taught at the University of Washington.

He doesn’t find shifting back and forth from the legislative to the executive branches difficult. “After all,” he said, “both ends of town are after the same thing—the best policy we can get.”

Dr. Sheldon and his 23 people—when he has that many—field some 2,000 requests from Congress each year. They are, of course, behind in their work. Each man fills out a “backlog report” which currently shows some seven weeks in arrears.

“A committee staffer will say, ‘do you think we might be able’ to do thus-and-so—and I’ll have to say no. If we did get twice the staff, we’d simply do twice the work,” Dr. Sheldon says.

Congressmen and their staffs are among the most demanding people on earth. “Get my job out today,” one will say. “The boss is leaving on a trip tomorrow morning and he’s got to have the speech before then.” If you multiply that sort of thing by the 535 Members of Congress, to say nothing of the committees and subcommittees, you can see Dr. Sheldon’s problem.

Helping him with it is a group of senior specialists that includes:

- Richard A. Carpenter, assistant chief, an organic chemist whose background includes service as liaison with government agencies in military and aerospace fields for Shell Oil and Callery Chemicals Co., particularly in the fields of propellants. He handles rocket matters and environmental sciences.

- Freeman H. Quimby, a biologist and former chief of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Exobiology Program. He handles the life sciences.

- Warren H. Donnelly, with degrees in both physics and public administration, a specialist in government-science relationships. A former employe of the Atomic Energy Commission, Donnelly follows nuclear matters as well.

- Robert L. Chartrand, once with IBM and the Central Intelligence Agency, the division’s computer and information systems specialist. He also serves as adviser to the Librarian of Congress on automation of the library.

Dr. Sheldon cannot talk about the major studies going on in the division at the moment—there is a “lawyer-client relationship” between his group and the Congress, which simply means that sometimes the client wants to take the credit for the division’s work.

Division studies acknowledged by Congress in the past have been responsible for pending legislation to strengthen the National Science Foundation (SN: 3/4), hearings on the invasion of privacy currently going on, oceanography policy (SN: 3/25), the current hassle over the setting up of a Federal Data Center (SN: 3/25).

“The beauty of the division,” Dr. Wenk once observed, “is the requirement that it be objective. The test of its quality lies in its balanced treatment of the facts—but not their emasculation to make everything a neutral gray.”